

The Legacy of Bruce Lee

By Richmond O'Connor

Jeet Kune Do and the Art of Professional Football

Bruce Lee revitalized—and transformed forever—the world of martial art. But did the Little Dragon ever guess that in advocating using “what works” and absorbing “what is useful,” he would revolutionize a long-cherished American sport—professional football???

For weeks the sportswriters had ballyhooed the game as the “greatest Super Bowl match-up of all time.” The contest pitted the two undeniably superior teams of the National and American Football Conferences. It was a game that was expected to shatter Super Bowl records, stun audiences with its explosive display of offensive power, and thrill millions as the seasoned and brilliant Joe Montana faced off against the meteoric genius of rookie quarterback Dan Marino. This Super Bowl, it was argued, would change the face of professional football.

When the dust had cleared, the sportswriters had been left in the lurch. With supreme confidence, the San Francisco 49ers blasted the Miami Dolphins out of Palo Alto's Stanford University Stadium. And Marino, the boy genius who has electrified football fans while shattering nearly every passing record in the book, was left frustrated by a perceptive, hard hitting 49er defense.

That day left Tim Tackett and Larry Hartsell feeling extremely satisfied. “I definitely saw a few techniques that we'd taught them being used,” Tackett, a certified JKD instructor and a student of Bruce Lee's, said with a satisfied gleam in his eye.

Pro football—it's the latest arena for jeet kune do. And for the San Francisco 49ers, defensive skills that day were in part a supreme test of “absorbing what is useful”—a new training regimen for defensive linemen that concentrated on *hubda* drills, *chi sao* exercises, and the advanced slipping and fighting principles of the Little Dragon's jeet kune do.

The 49ers weren't the only—nor the first—team in professional football to employ martial arts training. The Dallas Cowboys, who suffered a disappointing season due to injuries, internal turmoil, and the ever-present question of who would be quarterback this week, were pioneers in using such training for their defensive line. And as training geared up this summer, Tim Tackett, Larry Hartsell, Dan Inosanto and

other members of the JKD inner circle began to prepare once more for their state-of-the-martial-arts football training seminars.

The JKD-Pro Football Connection

“First of all, none of this would have been possible without Bruce Lee,” Tim Tackett Sr. says of the JKD football program. (Tackett Jr. is also a regular teacher in the training sessions.) “Bruce gave us the practicality, the problem-solving that put it all together. His great achievement as a teacher was to give the student the tools and the motivation—and trust the student to find his own way. That gift of questioning—examining things, exploring new approaches—was a gift beyond value.

“Then there are the men in professional football,” Tackett continues. “Men like Bob Ward and Randy White. From Bruce came inspiration, from Dan Inosanto came the practical foundation, and from men like Bob Ward came the opportunity to demonstrate the universal practicality and worth of JKD.”

The connection between JKD and football has its earliest roots in the mid-'50s. Dan Inosanto, later Bruce Lee's closest disciple, played football at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. Despite his short stature, Inosanto was the leading ground gainer for his team. He quickly came to the attention of a coach named Bob Ward.

The matter lay until 1971. Inosanto had of course gone on to become a major force in martial arts, having first studied kenpo with Ed Parker and then JKD under the close tutelage of Bruce Lee. Inosanto was also a superb master of Filipino martial art. Moreover, Inosanto has always retained the qualities that first brought him to Bruce Lee's attention: an open-mind and a thirst for martial arts knowledge that knew no bounds. Reenter Bob Ward, now the track coach with the California State University at Fullerton. Ward began to study martial arts with Inosanto in Inosanto's backyard—an association that stretched from 1971 until 1976.

In 1976, Ward was selected as the conditioning coach for the Dallas Cowboys. He quickly introduced the principles of JKD to players Larry Cole, Cliff Harris, and Charlie Walters. The players were fascinated; the coaches intrigued.

Thus it was in 1976 that the JKD/pro football connection was forged: Robert Bustillo, Jerry Poteet, and Dan Inosanto—Bruce Lee's JKD cadre—visited the Cowboys' training camp at California Lutheran College in Thousand Oaks, California. The seminars and JKD training were an unqualified success. The Cowboys, one of the finest professional football teams in the history of the sport, were firmly convinced of the utility of martial arts in training.

The following year Jerry Poteet developed specific JKD principles for football application. From 1978 until the present, JKD personnel have traveled to the Cowboys' summer camp to work with the players. Tim Tackett Jr., for example, worked with Randy White. And from Poteet's original JKD principles, new pass rushing techniques were devised.

The JKD-Dallas Cowboys relation intensified. In 1981, Bustillo and Inosanto journeyed to the summer camp to introduce the players to the new directions JKD had taken since Lee's death. The players were instructed in the Filipino art of kali, with Bustillo and Inosanto demonstrating and teaching *sinawali*, two-stick kali tactics to develop the players' coordination and footwork. In 1982, the JKD team introduced the cowboys to wing chun practitioner Frances Fong. Fong demonstrated the use of wing chun energy principles and exercises such as *chi sao*, the famed “sticking hands” of Bruce Lee's foundation art. At this point the Cowboys were alone in incorporating martial arts into their regular program. Then came another breakthrough—1983.

That year in the Pro Bowl, the defensive line coach was Bill McPherson of the San Francisco 49ers. “He asked his all pro players to demonstrate their two favorite techniques,” Tackett Sr. recalls. “Randy



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Combat JKD

As the attacker (left) moves in (1), the defender checks the attacker's left arm with his right and circles the attacker's right arm with his left (2). Defender now maintains the check while executing a left pak sao slapping block to ride down the attacker's right arm (3). The defender shifts his right arm over to seize the attacker's right elbow, jerking him forward and off-balance (4). The defender now slams a palm heel strike to the exposed kidney (5).



Football Application

The JKD tactic above is easily adapted to a football situation: player black (right) again uses JKD trapping tactics to off balance his opponent, securing the elbow and shifting outside (1-3). But from here, black now sets (4) and pushes off from his opponent (5). This frees the player to pursue other targets of opportunity—like the opposing quarterback.



White demonstrated his pass rushing tactics—and they were JKD based movements." McPherson was intrigued, and in 1984 JKD men like Tackett and Hartsell were working with the Dallas Cowboys and the 49ers—and it all paid off in the Super Bowl (not that the entire success of the team's defensive line can be laid at JKD's door).

As Bill McPherson explained after the Tackett's three day seminar in the summer

of '84, "The Tacketts did an amazing job. They showed us a wealth of pass rushing techniques that really worked. Their techniques were quite innovative—I showed them one of our pass rushing tactics, and they were able to come up with six variations off that technique."

The JKD Approach to Football

Multiplicity—being able to take one movement or technique and weave a chain

of variations off it—has long been a JKD trademark. And Tim Tackett Sr. has no doubt that that's one of the star attractions of the JKD-based training programs.

"Defensive linemen," he explains carefully, "have at the most four or five techniques for pass-rushing moves. If the lineman can learn four or five variations to each move, then the offensive lineman must defend against a range of 20-25 techniques. This complicates his job—and can prevent

him from line."

As Tai kali principle coming up problems. team for process. for general develop to blocking to



Combat JKD

Opponents square off (1); defender left in black shirt. The attacker executes a right hook (2) which the defender counters with a pak sao slap block to the shoulder (3). The pak sao converts into a lap sao grab to the elbow, which the defender reinforces with a right elbow strike to the arm above the elbow (4), which loosens the arm muscles. Defender shifts his grab, shoots his left across attacker's chest, and locks out the enemy's elbow (5).



Football Application

In the modified football application, the black player (left) meets the lineman's rush with a modified, double pak sao type trap (1-2) and shifts to the outside (3), though the elbow should *not* work against the opponent's arm. With a grip on the opponent's arm secure, black brings his right wrist up behind the opponent's neck (4) and jerks the opponent forward, freeing black (5).



him from responding in time to the defensive line."

As Tackett sees it, "By using JKD and kali principles, we are able to problem solve, coming up with specific answers to specific problems. And after you have worked with a team for a period of time, you refine the process. Not only are you problem solving for general defensive tactics, but you can develop tactics against specific opponents' blocking techniques." (The 49ers used their

JKD tactics effectively against the LA Raiders in the opening game of the '84 season.)

Last summer, Tackett and company, in seminars for both the Cowboys and the 49ers, stressed what Tackett described as, "new pass rushing techniques and power methods. We introduced new ways of using power. Instead of the old method of using pushing power, we stressed snapping power and footwork to off balance the opponent.

Now, it's true that you can't use JKD tactics directly, but all of the principles of the art are easily applied to slipping past an opponent and popping free to carry out the assignment—sack the quarterback or sew up the run.

"One really beneficial exercise we used this past summer was the kali *hubda* energy exchange drill. You see, it's not just important that pass rushers have enough techniques so that offensive linemen can read

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the energy of the defensive line, it's also important that the defensive lineman flow with the energy given him by the offensive lineman. The objective is to get free to rush the passer, whether one can off balance the offensive lineman immediately, or whether one takes his energy, neutralizes it, ties him up—and the lineman pops free."

Another area concentrated upon the past two summers has been footwork. "Dan (Inosanto) brought in Chai Sirisute, the Thai boxer. They were developing the players' footwork. And Chai had them kicking Thai knee pads to develop their lower leg strength.

"In fact," Tackett laughs, "Randy White actually went 14 three minute rounds. And then, of course, there were elbow and knee tactics from Thai boxing—how to develop those techniques, modify them, and use them to slip out of the opponent's grasp." (It's said that Dallas Cowboys head coach, the fabled Tom Landry, took one look at Chai's Thai boxing techniques and quipped that while he didn't know if it helped on the football field, it should work great in a bar.)

In addition to teaching the defensive linemen how to neutralize their opponents, Tackett, Hartsell, Inosanto and the others also teach the offensive line how to neutralize such defensive tactics. "If you're facing an opponent who knows the same sort of JKD-related tactics, then you know what to expect and how to counter them," Tackett explains. The Cowboys' week-long training program also involved Gary Hogeboom, focusing on how the quarterback could use bobbing and weaving to avoid the clutches of rushing linemen. Unfortunately for Hogeboom, he was blindsided from all directions during the season—in part the Cowboys' confused quarterback situation helped doom them to a mediocre season.

Of the Cowboys participating in the JKD/kali/Thai boxing training in 1984, was Jim Cooper, Brian Baldinger, Kurt Peterson and Chris Schultz, among others from the Cowboys' offensive line. Veteran linebackers Randy White, Ed "Too Tall" Jones and Jim Jeffcoat were among the defensive players.

The 49ers were restricted to a three-day training seminar. Lawrence Pillers, Dwaine Board, Manny Tuiasosopo and Jim Stuckey all concentrated on hand and speed development, upper and lower body coordination, and special tactics to pull—and shed—offensive linemen. All this would have been apparent to Dan Marino in the Super Bowl, if he hadn't been too busy avoiding the pressure the 49er defense was putting on his line—and on him.

JKD—Football's New Wave

"If there was a complaint," Tackett says of the 1984 training program, "it was just that the period of time was too short. Most of the Dallas players felt that two weeks or a month were necessary to really get the drills

and exercises down. The one week period let them get the hang of it. The 49ers camp expressed the same sentiment. Of course, with the Cowboys, you had individuals like Randy White who were already familiar with the basis of the program."

As Larry Hartsell pointed out, "I could see a real growth in the players' utilizing basic concepts of footwork, balance, explosion and coordination. They were getting the most out of their forward thrust."

Those sentiments were echoed by Bill McPherson, the 49ers defensive line coach. "Three days were definitely not enough. We definitely plan to have them all back."

And for the final word on JKD's importance to pro football, Bob Ward, the Dallas Cowboys conditioning coach, says flatly: "A lot of martial arts offer direct benefits to a professional football team. Not only does this involve speed, stamina, power, efficiency, and explosive footwork—all critical qualities in football—but it involves the modification of specific martial arts tech-

Cowboys conditioning coach Bob Ward believes that all pro teams will have "energy" coaches ala the JKD seminar team within five years.

niques for football tactics as well. In the future—within five years I believe—teams will have fulltime energy coaches ala Jerry Potet or Larry Hartsell and Tim Tackett. They've introduced a new and exciting aspect to professional football."

Tackett concludes, "As I said earlier, we owe it all first to Bruce, who gave us the skills to analyze and problem solve. Dan Inosanto gave us the practical foundation. But it was men with open attitudes like Bob Ward and Bill McPherson who gave us a chance."

Tackett reflects back to the three-day training seminar he hosted with the 49ers. "The open attitude of defensive line coach Bill McPherson and his assistant Tommy Hart, plus the interest showed by all of the players, made that a great experience. It also taught me a lot—that working with the players on specific problems showed both me and my son that we could use JKD and kali principles to come up with solutions to specific problems that were outside of the direct sphere of martial art."

He laughs for a second. "I'm still a JKD man—continually in the process of learning, learning, learning."

In the summer of 1985, so is pro football—the JKD team is conducting their intensive seminars for yet another summer. And as in 1984, the next Super Bowl champion team may be the one that absorbs what is useful and what works—jeet kune do.

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Top: The JKD team at the 1984 Dallas Cowboys training camp. From left to right: Unidentified; Cowboy Randy White; JKD instructor Larry Hartsell; the Cowboys' conditioning coach Bob Ward; JKD instructor Tim Tackett and assistant Paul Vunak. Above, left: Tackett gives pointers to Dwaine Board of the San Francisco 49ers at the '85 training camp; Tackett and Randy White practice arm sensitivity training; Tim Tackett Jr. works out with 49er Jim Stuckey.



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